

## **Conflict Management Skills**

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### **1) Staying in Control**

- 1) Our natural response to verbal abuse is to respond aggressively and defensively. Instead of reacting in a knee-jerk fashion when dealing with a coach or player do this. If a coach begins to berate you, ask the coach "What did you see?". This will immediately switch your tone to an empathetic one and places the burden on the coach to explain their behaviour. (College baseball umpire Randy Christal of Austin, Texas)
- 2) Remember, it's always better to slow down the situation with an aggressive coach or player, not speed it up.

### **2) Managing Conflict**

- To manage conflict effectively, you must understand that conflict is *inevitable*. As an official you are there to arbitrate competition, and the most you can hope for is respect. Officiating is not a popularity contest.

### **3) Recognizing Conflict**

Most players will display signs of frustration that could lead to conflict on the field. By recognizing the signs before conflict occurs, it will allow you to prevent and prepare for a possible conflict. A few of the signs are:

- A player's poor performance is an obvious sign of a player's frustration level.
- Look at player's facial expressions and body language for clues about their feelings. Tense facial muscles, such as a set jaw, may indicate that a player is close to acting aggressively. Be on the look out for staring or glaring as well.
- Always watch for contact away from the ball or after play ends. If there is any unnecessary contact, be sure to deal with it quickly and decisively. There may be non-contact situations away from the ball or after a play that you may need to watch out for as well. Generally it is in the form of trash talk or a stare down after a player has executed good play.
- Be on the lookout for "paybacks." Some players retaliate immediately, while others will retaliate later when the official may not be looking. Paybacks must be dealt with immediately to prevent an escalation of conflict.

#### 4) Planning for Conflict: Preventative Officiating

- The best way to prevent conflict is to be prepared. Having a firm understanding of the rules, mechanics and philosophy is the single greatest way to prevent conflict. Coaches and players who are certain that the rules are being applied properly will be less aggressive and more understanding of the calls and non-calls made on the field.
- Speak to coaches about your expectations for a fun, safe, non-conflict game prior to beginning of the game. Also let them know that any abuse will not be tolerated. This will set the tone from the on-set of the game.
- Here are some other strategies to take into account before officiating a game:
  - **Clear your head** – forget the mood you are in, tests you have, or other game experiences with the team(s) you have officiated already.
  - **Stay Objective** – Gain enough information to help you understand why certain things are happening in the game, but be responsible enough to sort through the information and treat each game as a new one.
  - **Don't take it personally** – One of the most difficult aspects to understand about officiating is that generally when people yell at you, they're yelling at your official's uniform and what it represents. Understand that players and fans will see things differently than you do. Allow some venting but make sure you have set the line for them not to cross.
  - **Decide what deserves a response** – Every question does not need a response. For example, if a coach says, "He's being to aggressive in his flag pulls" what is more effective: ignoring the statement or saying to the coach, "No way; he's been fine all night"? Most of the time, ignoring a harmless statement or acknowledging it with a simple head nod ends the matter. When you defend your position, the coach instinctively may go on the offensive and continue the debate. Ask yourself, "If I say something, will it do more harm than good?"
  - **Understand Game Context** – The intensity of the game, the closeness of the score, and how much time left in the game all play a part in how much and what type of conflict you must deal with. You may want to allow a little more leeway under those circumstances. Don't let players get away with extremely

unsportsmanlike conduct, but it does mean that the way in which you handle the end of game situation will likely have impact on the result, so you should consider the emotional charge of the situation and tolerate a bit more than you normally would in less critical situations.

#### 5) Implementing Conflict Management Tips:

- **Avoid Threats** – Officials' ultimatums back the officials themselves into corners as much as coaches and players...avoid using "One more word and you're gone!" Instead, use phrases such as, "I've heard enough."
- **Tell the Truth** – It's okay to say you made a mistake. Honesty is your best policy. If you do blow a call, it's okay to admit it quietly to the coach or player. If you do it too often, however, your reputation will suffer.
- **Don't Trivialize** – Though extremely tempting sometimes, don't ever utter the phrase, "It's only a game."
- **Point to a Shared Goal** – If you need to address something a player or coach is doing – before assessing a penalty if you use preventative officiating – keep the common goal in mind. Here is an example: "Coach, we need to work together to ensure the safety of all players. Can you please talk to number 45 about the rough play out here? That will help us protect the players. Thank you." By letting the coach/captain know that you both have a common goal – in this case, protecting the players – you're more likely to get cooperation from the coach/captain.

#### 6) Resolving Conflict

- In a Referee magazine feature story titled "Count to Ten," psychologist Dr. Bruce Baldwin detailed a plan to help resolve conflict:

a. Permit the other person to talk without interrupting. Use the "10 second" rule – Give a captain 10 seconds to vent before you respond.

b. Limit the discussion only to the immediate issue that is adversely affecting your relationship. Say things like, "Let's focus on this play and get it resolved. Now did you see this play?"

c. Choose an optimal time to bring up and discuss problems. Then keep the conversations focused and brief.

d. Judiciously avoid the other person's vulnerabilities or emotional sensitivities. Sarcasm is never a good instrument for promoting conflict resolution. Probably the biggest temptation is using a team's record or game score as a weapon.

#### 7) Tricks of the Trade

- Make a deal – If a player or captain is complaining about the same thing, make a deal with them. For example, "Okay captain, I've heard you. I'm going to watch that player exclusively for the next three plays. If he doesn't perform an infraction in the next

three plays, the complaining stops." The player will almost always accept the conditions. If the complaint is true, call it. If not, gently tell the complaining player so: "he looked clean on those plays."

- Place the ball down and whistle in the play – When someone starts to complain, get the play rolling as quickly as possible. Don't rush, but there is generally more complaining during dead balls. Your conflicts will decrease.

## **8) Penalties**

- Flag Football has a no tolerance policy for trash talk and offensive language in any way against officials, players, coaches, and parents. Here are how language situations should be dealt with:

- 1) A curse word clearly audible to others – immediate penalty
- 2) Trash talk to an opponent – penalize immediately
- 3) A captain from the bench or field maliciously arguing with an official - penalize immediate
- 4) Showing up an official – penalize immediately
- 5) Anything that starts with "you" – i.e. "You suck" or "Your terrible" - penalize immediately
- 6) Physical contact with an official – immediate ejection

Note – If the actions above are minor, they can be dealt with using a warning. Use your discretion when before throwing a penalty flag.

## **9) Ejections**

Have due reason to eject a player or coach.

- The ejectee(s) must be in a position of creating or has created a danger to the safety of those participating in the game. Verbal abuse can create a danger because of its power to escalate conflict.

## **10) Ejecting a Player**

- Player ejections usually occur from rough play or unsportsmanlike conduct. These steps should be taken to eject a player:

- 1) Throw the penalty flag following the infraction. Make the penalty and ejection calls in front of both benches.
- 2) **Inform the ejectee's coach that they are being ejected and that play will not resume until the player has left the field of play. Depending on the severity of the penalty, the player may be asked to leave the premises before play resumes (i.e. Throwing punches).**

- **Note – If a player has no means of leaving the premises, the game may be required to...\*\*\*\***

## **11) Ejecting a Coach**

- Coaching ejections usually always occur from abusive language. Always penalize and warn a coach on their first infraction before ejecting for the second. These steps should be taken to eject a coach on their second infraction:

- 1) Throw the penalty flag following the infraction.
- 2) Remain calm and explain to the coach that they have been warned and are being ejected from the game.
- 3) The coach must leave the premises for the game to continue and the game can only continue if the team has an assistant coach that can take over for the head coach.
- 4) Only once the coach has gone a safe distance, away from the premises may play continue.

Note - The assistant coach must be registered with Football Manitoba. No parents may come from the sidelines to take over for the coach.

## **12) Ejecting a Parent**

When a parent becomes so verbally or physically disruptive that they become a danger to the continuation of the game, they may be ejected. Steps to be taken:

- 1) Proceed to both coaches and ask them which team the parent belongs to.
- 2) Instruct the coach that the parent is being ejected from the game.
- 3) Have the coach accompany you to the parent to inform him/her/them of their immediate ejection.
- 4) If the parent refuses to leave the premises, you may end the game and the team which the parent belongs to will forfeit.

- Remember: when ejecting a player, coach or parent, never jeopardize your safety or the safety of those at the field. You are responsible for safety. If a situation is deteriorating, end the game and let cooler heads prevail.